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ABSTRACT

This discussion (1) briefly describes several projects that have successfully trained parents to be informal teachers of their children and (2) lists guidelines for effective parenting. Initially, a discussion of parent/child interaction reports evidence of the teaching role of parents. Findings of recent research are also reported regarding the role of the father in the childrearing process. Various approaches to parent education are discussed, including the Playgroup Movement, the University of Florida's home-based Parent Education Program, and three Australian approaches to parent education. Conditions for implementing parent education are discussed. Ways parents can assist teachers in school settings are also delineated. (RH)

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Unit for Child Studies

Number 21

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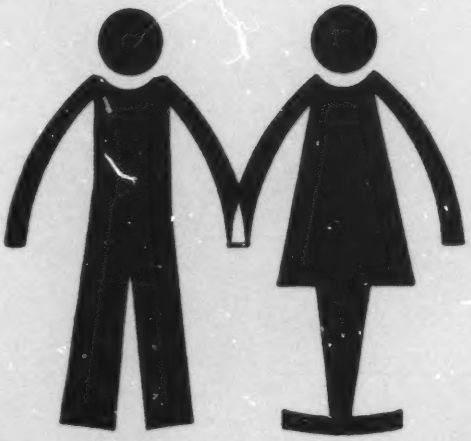

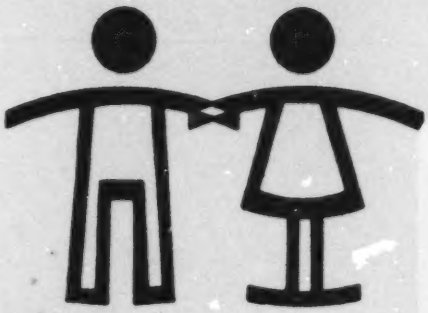

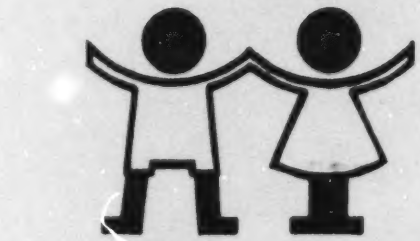

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THE PARENT AS AN INFORMAL TEACHER

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THE PARENT AS AN INFORMAL TEACHER

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Many parents believe that education is the task of the school. They think that teachers are more capable of educating their children because of their formal training and, anyway, parents would not know where to begin. The research literature on parenting does not support this belief. The educative influence of parents is generally considered to outweigh that of the school. This paper will briefly outline several projects which have successfully trained parents to be informal teachers of their children and will list some guidelines for effective parenting.

PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION

Parents may be defined as people who live with and care for one or more children on a continuous basis. This definition emphasises the *parenting* function, which may be carried out by the biological parents or by adoptive parents, legal guardians or the State. Most child psychologists consider that parents are uniquely placed to exercise a vital teaching role in the informal environment of the home. For instance, Strodtbeck (1967) maintained that each home has a "hidden curriculum" which depends on the ways family members relate to each other. If children from an early age are encouraged by their parents to express their needs, thoughts and wishes in a relatively status-free atmosphere - by parents adopting a person orientation rather than a position orientation - then these practices enhance language development. In other words, power relationships within families are conducted through language. According to Strodtbeck, language proficiency is important for academic achievement in the highly verbal environment of the school.

Further evidence of the teaching role of parents comes from a survey conducted in Manchester, England, for the influential Plowden Committee of Inquiry into Primary Education. The factors of parental attitude to education, to the school and to books were found to be of far greater significance in terms of their children's school achievement than either the parent's social class or occupational level. It was not the number of books in the home that was important but whether the children observed the available books being read. The author of the survey reported that "literate homes with good parental attitude to school may be found in the slums as well as in the suburbs" (Wiseman, 1967, p 328), and concluded that the influence of the home on educational progress is more powerful than that of the neighbourhood and the school.

The point deserves repeating that a family with a high income and a comfortable, spacious home does not guarantee an optimal environment for informal education to take place. As a result of their extensive research with mothers and their four-year-old children, Hess and Shipman (1965) conlcuded that the mother's teaching style was a more accurate predictor of her child's performance on a number of tasks than either her level of intelligence or her social class. One of the methods of measuring the mother's teaching style was to ask her to demonstrate the use of an educational toy called "Etch-a-sketch" to her four-year-old. This toy consists of a small box with a screen on which lines are

drawn by moving two knobs, one located at the side of and the other below the screen. One knob controls the horizontal direction of the line, the other the vertical direction. Each mother was given the task of teaching her child to copy a design (for example, a square) on the screen. The researchers found considerable variation in the teaching styles of the mothers. Some mothers were very articulate in explaining the use of the toy. Other mothers found great difficulty in explaining the nature of the task to their child. One solution commonly used by those mothers who were experiencing difficulty was to take over the knobs and to complete the task themselves, thereby cutting off the possibility of the child's thinking about and coming to a solution. According to Hess and Shipman, the meaning of cultural deficit for these children involved a deficit of meaning in their communication with their parents.

Discipline methods was a second area of differences between the mothers in Hess and Shipman's sample. As a result of observations in the home and in the laboratory, the researchers classified the various discipline methods used with their children into three categories:

1) the imperative-normative method;
2) the personal-subjective method; and
3) the cognitive-rational method.

The emphasis in the imperative-normative technique was upon unqualified demands such as "Do this", "Don't do that" and "Shut up". Personal-subjective methods involved appeal to the personal relationship between mother and her child. An example of this technique is "Mummy would like you to stop doing that, or else she won't like you". Cognitive-rational methods conveyed a reason for a rule to be obeyed by the child, such as "Please don't bang that drum while Mummy is speaking on the phone or Mummy won't be able to hear what Auntie Joan has to say." It was found that mothers who consistently used imperative-normative discipline techniques tended to have children whose performance on the intellectual tasks such as Etch-a-sketch was significantly lower than children whose mothers used personal-subjective or cognitive-rational methods. Hess and Shipman considered that imperative-normative discipline methods do not allow children to think about the consequences of their actions, but rather stop thinking in its tracks with a command to "do this" or "don't do that".

The Hess and Shipman studies contain important implications for parents and teachers. They clearly demonstrated that some parents adopted informal teaching strategies through which their young children were encouraged to be curious, active information-seekers. They revealed that there are quite distinct differences in the quality of adult-child interaction and that these differences are related to children's performance on a variety of tasks.

The vital role that parents play in the first three years of their children's lives has been underlined by the research of White and Watts (1973). The major goal of this intensive observational project was to discover how the home environments of highly competent and less competent children differed in early childhood. The researchers were interested in the children's social as well as their non-social competence. Social competence was defined as abilities necessary in a social context, such as the ability to attract and maintain attention of adults and peers in socially acceptable ways. Non-social competence included language facility, intellectual ability, decision-making abilities and concentration. Having observed more and less competent children at the age of six in order to derive their definitions of competence, White and Watts turned their attention to examining how different levels of competence were produced in the home. A major difference was observed in the quality of mother/child interaction from as early as the end of the child's first year of life. Based on their moment-to-moment observations of mothers and their children at home, the re-

searchers found that mothers of the more competent children "interact more with them, teach them more often, encourage them more often, initiate activities for them more often, and are more successful in controlling their children" (White and Watts, 1973, p 199). These differences between more and less competent children began to appear towards the end of their first year of life, as their language skills and physical movement around their home environment increased. Mothers of more competent children had decided that a young child and an immaculate home were incompatible, and so were not disturbed if the child's play activities produced a mess. Nevertheless, as White and Watts reported, they were more successful in controlling their children through these play activities, so that the children rarely became bored and destructive in their play. In a follow-up study, White, Kaban and Attanucci (1979) found that on many occasions mothers restricted development of their young children by using too simple and too little language when responding to their overtures.

THE ROLE OF THE FATHER

Little was known until recently about the father's role in the child-rearing process. Most of the research investigated mother/child interaction, probably because of the relative difficulties involved in observing father/child interaction. Fathers, most of whom were away from home at work, were simply unavailable to researchers during the daytime. There is a growing body of evidence, however, to suggest that the father's role is complementary rather than identical to that of the mother. For instance, the abovementioned Wiseman survey, based on interviews with both mothers and fathers in the home, summarized its results as follows: "the role of the mother defending and protecting the weak child and that of the father stimulating and encouraging the strong emerges surprisingly clearly from our analysis" (Wiseman, 1967, p 382).

A study involving forty family groups composed of a father, mother and a son aged between nine and eleven years also reported differences between father/son and mother/son interactions. The task involved blindfolding the boy and asking him to stack as many blocks on top of each other as he could. Parents were allowed to give verbal assistance but were asked not to physically intervene in the task. The purposes of the experiment were to measure the boys' level of achievement motivation, defined as a desire to attain a high standard of performance on the block-building task, and to relate achievement motivation to parental interactions. The researchers concluded that, in order for a high level of achievement motivation to develop, "the boy appears to need more autonomy from his father than from his mother ... the mother who dominates the decision-making process is perceived as *imposing her standards* on the boy, while a dominating father is perceived as *imposing himself* on the son (Rosen and d'Andrade, 1969, p 83). These authors considered that the relationship between the mothers and their sons may have been more secure than that existing between fathers and sons, so that the boy is better able to accept his mother's criticism without its affecting his achievement motivation. On the other hand, fathers described as rejecting, dominating and cold appeared to be a threat to their son's desire to achieve on the task.

Recent research carried out by Hess, Dickson and Price (1977) confirms these findings. Using a similar tower-building task to that employed by Rosen and d'Andrade, these researchers found a markedly different pattern of informal teaching strategies adopted by fathers and mothers of six-year old children. Fathers tended to emphasize *orienting* the child to the game and then *informing* the child about the nature of the task (for example, "if you start the tower with the bigger blocks you will probably make a taller tower"), whereas mothers tended to use a *directive* strategy (for example, "do it this way"). Mothers influenced the performance of their children on verbal tasks more than fathers, whose primary influence was in the development of spatial skills such as tower building. Fathers who used an informing teaching strategy had children whose

performance on the tower-building task and on other cognitive tasks was generally superior to that of children whose fathers employed a directive style. Hess, Dickson and Price explained this result in terms of the opportunity the informing teaching style gave the children to use their own reflective abilities and to generate rules of action for themselves.

Recent research within Australian families confirms the finding of a complementary role rather than an identical role for fathers and mothers towards their children. Russell (1977) conducted interviews with forty-three two-parent families in a Sydney suburb and two small country towns. Families were recruited from three shopping centres by asking them whether they had a child under the age of ten and lived in the area surrounding the shopping centre. About sixty per cent of those satisfying these criteria agreed to participate in the survey. The interviews were carried out in the families' homes. Questions about the roles and activities of parents were asked of fathers first, then mothers, in the presence of the partner. This procedure was followed so as to allow each partner to check the other partner's estimate of the amount of time each week they spent doing various things with the children.

Russell found that fathers played a complementary role to mothers in that relatively more of their available time was spent in play activities with their children and less in caretaking. Furthermore, the type of play was different for fathers and mothers. Fathers engaged more frequently in active play, both indoors and outdoors, while mothers were more involved in indoor, toy-oriented play.

Wide differences were reported in the involvement of fathers in the care of their children. Sixty per cent of all fathers in the sample were not involved in day-to-day care responsibilities, whereas approximately twenty per cent of fathers were considered to be highly involved in play and other care-giving interactions with their children. When sex-role orientations were measured, high masculine-high feminine fathers (called "androgynous" because they believed men are both, say, aggressive and loving) spent more time with their children than did high-masculine fathers. The most involved fathers tended to have both high-masculine and high-feminine sex-role orientations. For mothers, no relationship between sex-role orientation and amount of time spent with their children was found, suggesting that our society prescribes more rigid role definitions for mothers who are expected to spend much of their time with their young children.

Less time was spent by fathers with their children than by mothers, according to Russell (1977). An average of 1.7 hours of 3.2 available hours was spent by fathers interacting with their children. Mothers, on the other hand, estimated that they spent 4.4 hours of 9 available hours with their children. It must be remembered that these are *estimates* based on responses to interview questions, rather than direct observations of actual mother/child and father/child interactions. While Russell claims that his data are closely comparable with those of Kotelchuck (1972), the latter's findings were also obtained from interviews. More recent *observational* studies of father/child interaction have reported that fathers spend considerably less than the above amounts of time interacting solely with their children (Hoffman, 1977).

The influence of the child upon the father was highlighted by Australian research reported by Barry (1980). The research related the sex of pre-school children to parental sexism. Parental sexism was divided into *overt* and *covert* sexism. Overt sexism was measured by reaction to two questions:

1) How do you see yourself regarding the aims of the Women's Liberation Movement? and
2) What is your attitude regarding women taking a greater role in decision-making in our society?

Covert sexism was assessed by ratings on the importance of sex-appropriate toys for their children (for example, dolls for girls). Whereas there was little difference in the covert sexism between mothers of boys and mothers of girls, fathers of boys appeared to be almost twenty-five per cent more sexist than fathers of girls. It was claimed that having a daughter influenced a father to re-evaluate his attitudes towards the role of women in society and to change his views in a less sexist direction. While this is an interesting hypothesis, it requires a longitudinal study in order to test its validity. Prospective fathers would need to be asked these questions, observed to measure the degree of their sexist behaviour, and then re-interviewed and observed subsequent to becoming fathers of a boy or a girl. Other unanswered questions concern the effects of having both a son and a daughter, as well as the impact of birth order of the two sexes, on the sexism of fathers.

Methodological problems with father/child interaction studies to date preclude the drawing of firm conclusions. The state of the research is roughly equivalent to the position of mother/child interaction research in the early 1960s. There is an urgent need for more well-controlled, observational studies of precisely what fathers *say* and *do* in their interactions with their children. Second-hand reports by fathers, mothers and even the children themselves are subject to considerable distortion by forgetting, attempting to please the interviewer, and inaccurate accounts. More precise measurements of father/child interaction are necessary to avoid misinterpreting the subtleties of the interactions. Observers who are given high-inference categories such as "play" and "talk" in completing observational rating scales are likely to miss out on the complexity of the interactions involving individual fathers and their children. Concepts such as "play" and "talk" need to be broken down into various categories of play and talk before an accurate picture of parent/child interaction is obtained.

PARENT EDUCATION

The idea that prospective parents and parents themselves should receive some kind of education or preparation for their role has long been advocated but rarely implemented. In her interviews with young parents, Richards (1978) found that most were unprepared for the many problems which arose in coping with an infant for many hours every day. Many mothers blamed themselves for these difficulties, not realizing that they were shared by other mothers.

One of the informal institutions which has served to reduce this communication gap is the Playgroup movement. Playgroups meet usually once or twice a week for a couple of hours in a community hall. Parents, generally mothers, and their pre-school-aged children meet in an informal atmosphere to play and talk to each other. Besides providing an opportunity for children of between one and four years to play together, a playgroup performs the very real function of allowing mothers of young children to compare notes on the difficulties they are facing with their new role as parents. Through this informal contact with others who are in a similar situation to their own they come to realize that their problems are usually shared by others. These problems are not unique, nor are they a threat to their competence as parents. The importance of this communication function is indicated by the fact that, in New South Wales alone, the number of playgroups affiliated with the Playgroup Association has grown from 170 in 1974 to approximately 1,000 in 1980.

The Playgroup movement's philosophy emphasises local initiative by parents to organise and operate their own playgroup. By affiliating with the Playgroup Association of their State, playgroups receive advice on establishing their centres, activities that have worked well in other playgroups, and a regular newsletter. The Playgroup philosophy sees the parent as the responsible person in Australian society, especially for the first five years of a child's life. It also recognises that parents, by meeting together, can be more effective with their children.

One of the first systematic attempts to assist mothers to become more effective with their children's intellectual and social development was initiated by Gordon (1973). The Parent Education Program at the University of Florida had two basic aims:

1) to provide the mother with specific activities through which she might teach her child, beginning as early as three months of age; and
2) to bring about the following changes in the mother herself:

   (a) an increased self-esteem;
   (b) a change in the belief that she might be a victim of chance and fate to a belief that she can influence what happens to her;
   (c) a valuing of the activities and materials that might enable her children to reach the aspirations she was setting for them; and
   (d) exposure to language and language materials that might enable her to provide her children with an increased verbal ability.

Volunteer mothers of children between the ages of three months and two years were visited once a week in their homes by a specially trained parent educator who was chosen because of her similar cultural or community background. The parent educator demonstrated concrete activities for mothers to do with their children, as well as explaining that these activities were important for their children's development. She also taught simple toy-making skills so that the mothers themselves could make hand puppets, mobiles and stuffed toys from inexpensive materials. Each task was taught by the parent educator's demonstrating the skill and then observing the mother actively engaged in the task with her child.

When the child reached two years of age, the once-a-week home visit was combined with what was called a "backyard centre" setting. Each child spent four hours a week in the home of one of the project mothers, together with four other children, a situation resembling the Australian family day-care concept. The children received individual tutoring for about fifteen minutes in each two-hour session from the parent educator who was their mother's teacher. The rest of the time they engaged in play activities with toys selected because they offered learning opportunities, they were read to or handled books themselves, and they learned some group games.

The results of this home-based Parent Education Program were encouraging. Children tested at one year of age out-performed a control group of children on a general test of their developmental age as well as on materials and activities specially prepared for the evaluation of the Program. The two-year-olds also achieved significantly higher scores in these areas than a control group which was not exposed to parent education. Perhaps of equal significance to the children's performance was the finding that the mothers increased their sense of power as informal teachers as a result of the Program.

A parent education course has been implemented in the western suburbs of Sydney by a Macquarie University research team. Trained pre-school teachers visited the homes of volunteer mothers and their four-year-old children once a week over the period of a school year. The goal was to introduce the mothers to ideas, activities and simple materials which the mothers were encouraged to try out with their own children. Every attempt was made not to talk down to the mothers, nor to force them to implement the activities. Rather, through the use of friendly suggestions, mothers were encouraged to think of themselves as informal teachers of their children. An evaluation of this home-based approach to pre-school education reported that these children performed just as well on a series of tests as did a group of children exposed to the traditional school-based form of pre-school education (Alexander & Clark, 1979).

A second Australian approach to parent education was initiated by Staines (1977) in Newcastle, NSW. Working from hospital records of births, the researchers contacted parents living in a Newcastle suburb which, according to the statistics, produced more than its share of health problems in children, crime, welfare recipients and juvenile delinquency. Parents who volunteered to participate in the research project were visited regularly by a trained parent educator who explained basic principles of health, nutrition and child development. Home visits were made within a month of the mother's leaving hospital with her new baby. Once again, the approach avoided "preaching" to the mothers so as not to alienate the families involved in the project. A follow-up of the children is still being undertaken.

A somewhat different approach to intervention in the lives of families with young children was adopted in another Australian project called the Catalyst Programme. The term, "catalyst", was adapted from its original meaning of a chemical substance which acts to change another substance without changing itself. Beginning in 1975, eleven catalysts were appointed in NSW, eleven in Victoria and ten in Tasmania. The criteria for selecting a catalyst were:

> "1) to be available in a community, full-time for a finite period;
> 2) to meet with all in the community, but to orient towards points of greatest apparent directionlessness in the community;
> 3) to meet face to face; and
> 4) to meet on invitation from the first and on all occasions with all;
> 5) to share information;
> 6) to listen and allow people to decide and advocate and act for themselves;
> 7) to learn, grow, live with this mode of functioning;
> 8) to be supported as he/she is buffetted in his/her exposed position among officials, the community and other professionals."

(Grey, 1976, pp 11-12).

The major goal of the Catalyst Programme was to galvanise expressions of community need. Catalysts were appointed to work in communities where the needs were greatest. The catalysts were expected to concentrate their time, energy and thought on parents with children up to three years of age, while not neglecting families with older children. It was not the function of the catalyst to take leadership roles in the community groups which were formed out of local initiative. Rather, the catalyst's task was to build an awareness in amongst the community of its need for children's services and how they could best be met. One effect of the Catalyst Programme has been the mushrooming of playgroups which parents organized and participated in. As Joan Fry has said: "Parents have far greater influence on kids than any preschool. So it's a matter of helping parents to feel they can give their children a better life than they had." (quoted in Grey, 1976, Appendix A, p 8).

WHO NEEDS PARENT EDUCATION?

The research evidence strongly supports the position that parents act as informal teachers of their children. Whether they act consciously or unconsciously, parents play a crucial role in their children's language, cognitive and social development. Yet, parenthood is one of the major social roles for which Australians are least prepared. The question arises, "Who needs parent education?"

In an unconventional answer to this question, Bronfenbrenner stated that "the groups most in need of parent education are those who do not yet, no longer, or never will have children" (1978, p 767). Bronfenbrenner's rationale for his answer was based on evidence that the family in complex western societies is changing so rapidly that it needs a support system of friends, relatives, neighbours and, indeed, politicians who will legislate to preserve the advantages of a warm, intense, emotional relationship between a caring adult and a developing child. Therefore, according to Bronfenbrenner, it is not just parents or even prospective parents who need parent education, but also decision-makers who influence the form of the family in the future.

Margaret Mead, the noted anthropologist, advocated a similar view, based on her observation that western societies place heavy responsibilities on the biological parents for the care and education of their children. They expect an individual family to do, unaided, what a whole clan, tribe or community achieves in other cultures. Mead considered that the intense, emotional relationship between parents and children needs to be tempered with interactions with other supportive adults (Burns & Goodnow, 1979).

Given that the primary responsibility for rearing children will remain with parents for the foreseeable future, a second question arises: "When is the optimum time for parent education?" Is it in primary school, high school, premarriage, the pre-natal or even the post-natal period?

The Report of the Royal Commission into Human Relationships (1977) addressed this question. The Sydney paediatrician, Clair Isbister, who has conducted preparation for parenthood courses at the Royal North Shore Hospital, submitted that "people about to marry are not nearly as motivated towards receiving information and "discovering themselves" as they are during adolescence or when they are about to have a child" (1977, vol. 2, p 66). Isbister considered her experience had indicated that young people in school were willing to listen because physical changes occurring during adolescence gave rise to re-evaluating themselves and their goals. In addition, couples expecting a child were motivated by a sense of responsibility for the infant soon to be born. Voluntary organisations, such as the Family Life Movement, on the other hand, submitted that pre-marriage counselling could be effective in overcoming some of the unrealistic expectations of couples towards marriage and the family. The Australian Medical Association advocated a variety of approaches, including "prophylactic measures by education in human relations and sexuality at secondary school level" (1977, p 67).

Motivation for parent education is the first priority in deciding when to give it. Parent education could prove worse than useless if it were not relevant to the interests and purposes of the students. One example of a particularly effective approach is the child-care component of the personal development course offered in some Australian high schools. In the practical part of the course students help to care for an individual child, usually of pre-school age. Its mother may be present for part or whole of the time in order to demonstrate child-care practices such as feeding, bathing, clothing or playing with the young child. For so many of today's young people this experience fills a void caused by smaller families and the lack of opportunity for sustained inter-

action between adolescents and young children.

Another interesting example of a novel approach to parent education is the simulation exercise of caring for an egg. The exercise involves taking responsibility for an egg for a certain period of time, such as a week. The egg is not to be left unattended at any time, including shopping excusions, during the taking of a bath or shower, or even while sleeping. Persons who break their egg accidentally are required to start the exercise over again. This simulation exercise has been implemented in high schools and child care certificate courses to demonstrate the awesome responsbilities of the parents of a human baby. Many students "personalize" their egg by drawing a face on it, by giving it a name, and by making a temporary basket for their new charge. Some students find that their freedom of movement is severely curtailed by its presence and realize they are not yet ready for parenthood. Altogether, it is considered to be a novel way of demonstrating that being a parent involves important responsibilities for a fragile being.

Two recommendations of the Royal Commission into Human Relationships dealt specificially with parent education:

1) "Parent education programs should begin early in each school year and both parents should be encouraged to attend when their child enters infants school or pre-school, again on entry to primary school, and again at the age of puberty", and

2) "Parent education programs should be funded in hospitals as part of pre- and post-natal classes and ways should be sought to increase parent education programs to people expecting the birth of a child." (1977, p 76).

The Royal Commission saw advantages in encouraging couples planning marriage to undertake a course in marriage and the family, but stopped short of recommending that such a course should be compulsory. The problem with compulsory courses is that some involuntary couples would lack the necessary *motivation* to benefit from parent education.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Most teachers realise that parents play a vital role in preparing their children for school. The vast majority of children come to school with a well-advanced language system developed in the informal atmosphere of their home. They are bright-eyed and eager to learn. They accept teacher directions readily. The teacher's task is to capitalize on these abilities and attitudes. In doing so, the teacher's job is made a lot easier if the parents are treated as allies rather than as enemies. Parents may be utilized to complement the work of the school, not only at home but in the school itself. Many teachers are using parents as aides in skill teaching. This use applies in a wide variety of skills including reading, mathematics and gross motor skills programmes. Parents are helping teachers to individualize education by tutoring children in basic reading and number work. Some of this tutoring is of a remedial nature but much of it goes on in the regular classroom, thereby freeing the teacher to concentrate on counselling children on a one-to-one basis. Volunteer parents help out in gross motor skills programmes which require individual attention beyond the capacity of a single teacher with thirty or so children. Parents bounce balls to children, check that they can hop, skip and jump and give the encouragement so necessary to the success of this type of skill learning.

Parents are also assisting their children's schooling at home. As an example, the Curriculum Policy Statement on Reading from kindergarten to Year Twelve, recently released by the New South Wales Department of Education (1973), encourages parents to help their children by the following means:

1) use reading to communicate by placing notices on the refrigerator and other locations at home;
2) read letters received from relatives and friends to the children;
3) join the local library and take the children there;
4) demonstrate an attitude that reading is important and pleasurable;
5) read themselves and thereby be an example or a model to their children; and
6) read the children's story books aloud regularly.

In conclusion, teachers are recognizing that parents are an asset worthy of their strongest support. The school, as part of its surrounding community, complements the informal education the child is receiving during out-of-school hours. Parents are a human resource which has been overlooked for too long. The contribution of parents to their children's education does not cease when they enter the school gate for the first time, but continues throughout the years at school.

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